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ABSTRACT

Although school accreditation has a long history in the United States, relatively few elementary schools have sought and attained regional accreditation status. This paper examines the issues in regional accreditation for elementary schools with a focus on the process and benefits to the individual school. Steps in the process include self-study, onsite visitation, and postvisitation events. A conclusion is that the benefits justify the lengthy process. Several benefits are derived from each step in the process: (1) self-evaluation generates communication within and among departments, grade levels and staff; (2) on-site visitation brings new ideas for the curriculum, instruction, and organization and exposes staff to innovative programs and personnel elsewhere; (3) visiting team report presents constructive criticism. (LMI)

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SHOWCASING EXCELLENCE

A CASE FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL REGIONAL ACCREDITATION

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Should elementary schools seek regional accreditation (e.g., North Central Association of Colleges and Schools)?...What is to be gained?...Is the benefit worth the effort? This article will attempt to answer these questions by describing the regional accreditation process and delineating the specific benefits of the process to the individual school.

School accreditation has a long and distinguished history in the United States. Founded in 1895, the Commission on Schools has as its basic purpose the establishment of standards that would assure the presence of quality programs in member schools. The Commission is presently comprised of six regional accrediting bodies. Each supports an evaluation process designed to move schools toward the goal of improving programs and services for students.[1] Relatively few elementary schools have sought and attained regional accreditation status. For example, only 64 (2 percent) of the 3,044 chartered Ohio elementary schools have this

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[1] Handbook for NCA: Evaluation of Ohio's Schools. Columbus: Ohio NCA State Committee (August, 1989).

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quality credential.[2]

Seeking regional accreditation is a rewarding process. The value derived from extensive in-house deliberation on the meaningful aspects of education far outweighs the effort and expense of seeking this credential. Regional accreditation serves as an indicator to the community that a school meet rigorous qualitative standards.

The Process

Accreditation involves several steps that culminate in two distinct procedures: self-study and on-site visitation. These preliminary steps are important in setting the stage for successful accreditation efforts and are worthy of delineation.

Initial Steps Toward Accreditation

- Seek the advice of principals of nearby regionally accredited elementary schools on approaches to making the accreditation process effective.
  (Suggestion: Call your State Office of the NCA Commission on Schools if assistance is needed in identifying accredited schools in your locale.)
- Discuss with your faculty the advisability of pursuing accreditation.
- Formulate and present to your superintendent a position paper advocating accreditation.
- Seek consultative assistance from someone who has successfully chaired the accreditation process.

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[2] Ohio North Central Association State Director's Office. Telephone interview. (October 16, 1990).

- Set a schedule for the self-study and on-site visitation.
- Identify steering committee co-chairs for the self-study process and work with faculty in formulating overall plans for the accreditation process.
- Determine a realistic budget.

Once the decision to work toward improvement of your school's overall program has been made, more specific information regarding the accreditation process should be gathered. Regional directors of accrediting associations are willing and able to provide information critical to the process. Once this information is received, you or a designee should begin to work with the steering committee co-chairs to lead staff through the step-to-step school self-study process.

Conducting a self-study and follow-up with implementation provides your staff the opportunity to analyze and discuss program strengths and weaknesses in light of accreditation criteria and to suggest logical means for programmatic improvement. The self-study process is rigorous and generally requires one school year to complete. Therefore, realistic task deadlines need to be established and met. Working committees need to be identified in such basic areas such as philosophy and objectives, community relations, and administration and curriculum. Committee members should be allocated time to reflect upon their task area of focus, for only if the report is completed carefully and mindfully is it likely to be of value for school improvement purposes.

While the internal evaluation (self-study) is being conducted the external evaluation (on-site visitation) phase should be

planned. In the year preceding the on-site visitation, the administration should work with those chairing both self-study steering committee and the visitation team. You should carefully recruit team members who have the time, expertise and willingness to objectively compare the school's self-study report with its actual programs and practices. The visiting team is comprised of colleagues representative of varied age groups, ethnic backgrounds and levels of professional expertise.

On-Site Visitation

The purpose of the on-site visitation is to confirm the school's compliance with its self-study report. On-site visiting teams generally have twenty to thirty-five members (teachers and administrators from regionally accredited schools, representatives of universities, state department personnel, and if desired, members of the community). The visitation generally begins with a dinner attended by representatives of the school's staff, district board of education, district administration, visiting team, and the community. The dinner provides an ideal opportunity to showcase the achievements of student leaders as well as student performing groups. This social is usually followed by a team organizational meeting to identify the specific responsibilities of individual team members. During the following two-to-three days the team observes classes, interviews students/faculty/administration/ community members and peruses curriculum documents to verify the extent to which the program complies with the contents of the self-study report. Upon completion of the visitation the chair compiles the team report and presents a preliminary overview to the faculty

and administration. The printed report is then submitted to faculty and administration, as well as team members and the regional accrediting association office. The final accreditation decision is made by the regional accrediting association, not the visiting team.

Post-Visitation Events

Once the visiting team has completed its task and the final written report is submitted to the principal, contents should be studied carefully by school personnel. The school is required to use the findings identified in the final report as the basis for developing the school improvement plan. This plan for implementing the team's recommendations is then submitted to the state accrediting body.

Regional accreditation standards specify that a self-study and on-site visitation be conducted every seven years. This time span provides adequate opportunity for the school to implement recommendations. Also, an interim third year progress report is submitted to the state accrediting body to assure attention is being directed to the recommendations specified in the visiting team's report.

Conclusion

Several benefits are derived from each step in the accreditation process. They are as follows:

Process	Benefits Derived
Self-Evaluation	- Generates communication within and among departments, grade levels, and staff members.

Process (Cont'd)	Benefits Derived (Cont'd)
Forming the Visiting Team	- Brings together a variety of persons and perspectives. - Facilitates cross-fertilization of ideas. - Promotes networking of personnel and material resources.
On-Site Visitation	- Brings new ideas for curriculum, instruction, and organization to the building. - Exposes staff to innovative programs in other schools. - Gives staff members personal contacts with colleagues in other area schools. - Allows staff/students to showcase the school at its <u>best</u>.
Visiting Team Report	- Validates the school staff's perceptions of certain quality programs - Presents critical perceptions of program purposes and practices for staff consideration. - Presents program improvement suggestions for implementation.

Without question, the accreditation process is lengthy and time consuming. The benefits, however, more than justify the energy expended. The opportunity to showcase your school's assets to the professional community and prospective students, is in itself excellent cause for pursuing the process. The following quote says it best:

Regional accreditation is not an isolated event, but rather an ongoing opportunity for staff and administration to systematically access the total program. It is an integral part of the improvement process and provides the means to establish a plan based on data analysis, shared decision making, and collaborative planning.

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